



DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20314-1000

REPLY TO  
ATTENTION OF:

CECS (11-33b)

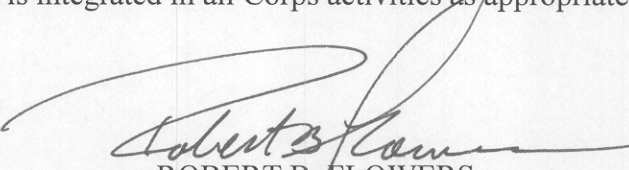
19 SEP 2002

COMMANDER'S POLICY MEMORANDUM #10

SUBJECT: The After Action Review in the Corps of Engineers

1. After Action Reports (AAR) need to be an integral part of Corps activities. In order to continue to improve our service to our stakeholders and as part of our learning organization, it is imperative to review our actions on a regular basis, evaluate how well we have met the goals and objectives of that action, and to provide lessons learned to others in the Corps who may benefit. The mechanism for doing this is the AAR. The Army has used the AAR process for a long time in combat organizations to become the best in the world. The Corps has used AARs on occasion with great success.
2. With the implementation of the Project Management Business Process (PMBP), we are institutionalizing a system of project delivery teams that include stakeholders in our operations. There are several points identified in the PMBP process for review and lessons learned. These points provide an excellent opportunity to use the AAR and improve our products across the board. The AAR will facilitate group discussion and incorporate all viewpoints in the review.
3. Learning organizations must take the lessons learned from current activities and use them to improve future activities. The AAR process is our tool to get this done. It can, and must, be applied to everything we do. Ensure that the attached guidance document is distributed and the AAR process is integrated in all Corps activities as appropriate.

Encl

  
ROBERT B. FLOWERS  
Lieutenant General, USA  
Commanding

## **The After Action Review in the Corps of Engineers**

After Action Reviews (AAR) are essential parts of becoming a learning organization. A good AAR can help prevent recurring problems, eliminate inefficiencies, and improve operations. Failure to conduct AARs, or to apply lessons learned from the conduct of an AAR, is not acceptable in today's climate of limited resources and increased scrutiny of the use of public money. The information provided below is adapted from FM 25-101 and TC 25-20. The AAR process applies to everything the Corps does.

### What is an AAR

An AAR is a professional discussion of an event, focused on performance standards, that enables a project delivery team to discover what happened, why it happened, and how to improve the product or process in the future. AARs are not critiques because they do not determine success or failure. They also do not look to assign blame or fault. AARs will involve all participants in the project whenever possible to make sure each viewpoint is represented in the analysis. An AAR will look at the events in chronological order and determine what caused those events to occur. AARs consist of four parts:

1. What was supposed to happen? (Mission)
2. What happened?
3. What went right or wrong?
4. How can the task be done better the next time?

The final step in the AAR process is feedback. Learning organizations use the experience of current and past projects to improve the results of future efforts. The results of an AAR must be incorporated into the body of knowledge of the organization and the lessons learned made known to everyone that may benefit from the review.

### Formal and Informal AARs

An AAR can either be formal or informal. Both types of AAR are conducted in a similar manner and cover the same points. Informal AARs can be conducted on an ad hoc basis. The participants can be convened after each step in the process, after a meeting or action is completed, or any time a quick review of the action may be beneficial. An informal AAR is often conducted at the site of the action. An informal AAR may, or may not, be documented and the results are often applied immediately to the conduct of the action.

Formal AARs are more structured and often are run by someone external to the project or action such as the next level supervisor or commander. This type of AAR is normally held at the conclusion of actions and is held wherever a formal review of this type could best be supported. The results of a formal AAR are always documented.



### Conducting an AAR

It is essential to plan to conduct an AAR for every action. It is also essential to plan how to conduct the AAR before the action is initiated. Formal AARs require more planning than informal AARs. All AARs:

- Are conducted during or immediately after each event
- Focus on objectives
- Focus on performance
- Involve all participants in the discussion
- Use open-ended questions
- Are related to specific standards
- Determine strengths or weaknesses
- Link performance to subsequent actions

AARs follow a standard format:

- Introduction and Rules
- Review of objectives
- Review mission and intent (what was supposed to happen)
- Review techniques and procedures (how was it to be done)
- Summary of recent events (what happened)
- Discussion of key issues (why it happened and how to improve)
- Discussion of optional issues
- Closing comments (summary)

The project leader or responsible party must also plan how the lessons learned will be made available to those who could benefit from them.

### Rules for Conducting AARs

- Review the Facts
- Ask leading questions that focus on the mission
- Relate events to subsequent actions
- Explore alternative courses of action that might have been more effective
- Avoid detailed examination of events not directly related to the mission
- Treat all participants with dignity and respect
- Look to fix the process, not assign blame
- Practice Active Listening

### Following Up

The real benefits from AARs come from taking the results and applying them to future actions. Leaders can use the information to assess METL proficiency or organizational efficiency. After Action Reviews are the dynamic link between task performance and execution to standard. Each organization must develop a process for distributing the lessons learned and incorporating the results into Standard Operating Procedures, training plans, operating plans or other mechanism as appropriate.

### Documentation

Each formal AAR must be documented and copies of the documents must be available. Some possible ways to make the documents available is through internal distribution to the branch chief level, posting on the local intranet, or distribution to Project Managers at scheduled program review meetings. It is the responsibility of the organization to determine what works for their internal needs and as well as making the information available for external review.

### The AAR in the Project Management Business Process (PMBP)

Although not necessarily identified by name, the intent of the AAR process is already included in the PMBP. Several stages in the PMBP flowchart identify lessons learned as an outcome, specifically at Change Management and Activity/Project Closeout. Fully incorporating the AAR process into the PMBP will help improve the outcome of individual projects, but more importantly, enable the Corps to learn from experience and improve as a service provider. At a minimum, informal AARs should be conducted at each step in the PMBP process with a formal AAR conducted at activity/project closeout where appropriate. Project/activity leaders must plan to include AARs as part of their project management activities. As a learning organization, we can continue to improve only by learning what is working, and not working, today and using that knowledge to improve our processes and products.